

FRAMES IN AMERICAN TV DISCUSSIONS

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Abstract: *The paper focuses on analyzing the role of frames in American TV discussions in conversation analysis framework. The analysis aims at creating a tentative classification of frame types depending on their interactive positioning in discussions and their meaning as perceived in participants' perspective. Observation of two discussion types shows that interactants' orientation to the type of the communicative event can influence the use of frames.*

Keywords: *conversation analysis, meta-formulations, reformulations, TV discussions.*

1. Introduction

In aim of the paper is to analyze the functions of frames, and more specifically, meta-formulations and reformulations in American TV discussions. Using conversational analysis perspective allows us to define formulations functions in the sequential context of an interaction. Thus, first, as their meaning is interpreted by interaction participants when they react to the first utterance in a sequence; second, as those conversational resources are deployed in a wider context of talk, not only in the adjacency pair co-text, but in reference to turns that appear in non-adjacent positions in talk, that is in follow-up or preliminary position, and in reference to the communicative event type. The next turn-proof procedure reveals listener's understanding of the preceding turn in the reactive move. However, such analysis is most effective if the sequence is closely bound by adjacency relationship, which is not always the case in longer discussions or interviews in which turns become more complex and can be simultaneously reactive and initiatory. Thus, an additional tool of the deployment of the action in a wider sequential context needs to be used.

2. Institutional interaction in conversation analysis perspective

In conversation analysis research, interviews as well as TV debates, which often resemble such interviews, are considered to be a type of institutional interaction and are analyzed against the background of the conversation which is treated as a primary form of social interaction. Additionally, comparisons are made with more classical and formalized TV

interviews. In general, in any data drawn from institutional settings interactants' deployment of originally conversational resources or talk practices to perform certain institutional tasks is observed (Clayman and Teas Gill 2004: 589-606).

The classical interview follows certain conventions, namely, a strict interactional structure, since as opposed to the conversation, interview talk restricts turn construction and turn allocation. Interviews unfold as a series of questions and answers turns, questions being respectively produced by interviewers (IR) and answers by interviewees (IE). It has been observed that in classical interviews, interviewee refrains from producing acknowledgement tokens (e.g. "uh huh, yeah"), news receipts (e.g., "oh," "really?"), or assessments (e.g. "that's great") (Heritage 1985, Greatbatch 1988: 406-407). However, in more relaxed formats, IR and IE produce listening tokens, and if it's a multiparty discussion, such tokens tend to be produced by those debaters who are just about to take a turn. In general, the interview format can be quite flexible and various deviations from the classical scheme can be observed.

3. Preliminaries, meta-formulations and reformulations

Customarily, interviewers embed statements or comments which are realized as preliminaries to questions and which frame them, setting topical agenda for the following answer. Journalists tend to use such pre-frames in the first part of the question in order to include an argumentative statement or an assessment in the sequential position which makes it more difficult for an IE to dispute. This happens because any evaluative comments appearing in the preliminaries are perceived as a background information to the question which needs to be addressed first in the successive turn (Clayman and Whalen 1998: 244-245).

Nevertheless, interaction participants customarily react to those preliminaries and reformulate the questions, first of all, in order to deal with their complexity, second, to find ways to contest argumentative statements embedded in IR's question frames and comments. The reformulation can begin, for example, in a short introductory meta-formulation, such as: "the premise of your question, John is..." Reformulating IR's formulations, IEs provide the frame for the ensuing answer, which is the action complying with the adjacency pair conversational rationale. IEs in their answers following answering part of a turn usually refer to the reformulated content, which is an immediately adjacent item of talk, rather than to the original and more interactionally distant IR's question (Clayman 1993: 160-161). A pattern that Sacks (54-69: 1987 after

Clayman 1993: 161) has termed the *preference for contiguity* in interaction. This strategy allows IEs to evade questions and to steer the topic trajectory as set up by IR's background statement.

Reformulations aim either at one component of a complex question or recast the gist of IR's turn. They can appear in the affirmative or interrogative form, as for instance in: "are you saying that...?" (Clayman 1993: 163-164). The aim of such reformulations is shifting the topical agenda and simultaneously contesting an assumption made by a journalist (Clayman 1993: 168). The reformulation usually differs syntactically from the ensuing response and precedes it in the same turn (Clayman 1993: 163). It may, though, occupy a separate turn, if an IR chooses to intervene with a repair initiation to steer the flow of talk back to the previous topic.

Most reformulations are preceded by a kind of a meta-formulation, however, not all meta-formulations introduce reformulations since, as the analysis of the below-presented data indicates, they can appear as lone-standing, separate units, often realized as separate turns in talk.

Meta-formulations that are analyzed in this article are less formulaic and ritualized than discourse markers alone which also show meta-textual functions, in the sense that they somehow describe or hedge ongoing talk. Instead, more marked and more elaborate actions often consisting of several elements, including discourse markers, are taken into consideration. Moreover, the observed meta-formulations make an explicit reference to talk, to discourse, to person's behavior, that is their communicative action happening online during interaction time. The focus is on the types of actions using direct meta-textual references to an unraveling communicative action, describing or assessing the way of arguing or producing other forms of talk, and resorting to discourse descriptors usually combined with the 1st and 2nd or 3rd person pronoun reference: "you describe," "I'm just saying" "it sounds like" or more specifically defining some argumentative action such as: "to generalize," ("you can't just generalize"), "argue," "claim," "point," etc. The meaning of referencing structure is usually highly dependent on the co-text and prone to varied interpretations on interaction participants' part.

Meta-formulations and reformulations can vary in the degree of politeness. They can be realized with distinct degrees of *directness* or the *mitigation*. The usage of meta-formulations and their degree of mitigation, as I would like to argue in my data analysis, depends on the genre as perceived by interaction participants.

Directness or bald on record is defined by Brown and Levinson as a strategy of speaking that conforms with the rationality of Grice's maxims, so oriented at maximum efficiency of communication. As opposed to indirect strategy, which is based on any communicative behavior in which the literal and conveyed meanings differ. Such directness of talk regularly appears in communicative events perceived as teases or joking (Brown and Levinson 1987: 94-96, 134). As was observed by Clayman and Heritage (2002: 759), journalists in presidential press conferences preface their questions with politeness or deference marking and indirect references to president's willingness or ability to answer the question, such as other referencing: "could you," "will you," or "would you," followed by a speech act verb like "comment," "tell" or self-referencing markers: "I would like to ask" or "I want to ask."

4. Data analysis

Data comes from two series of American TV discussions. The first excerpt is aired regularly on the internet and titled: *Uncommon Knowledge*. It is realized as a moderated academic discussion-interview, featuring invited experts on the subject with possibly divergent opinions. General subject of the first analyzed discussion is "Torture and the war on terror" and concerns the use of torture in fighting terrorism, mainly, in the US context.

Overview

Debaters use meta-formulations in this discussion to negotiate roles (journalist, interviewer and interviewee roles), to direct the topic agenda and to disagree politely. Speakers refer to their own utterance in the current discussion or other interactant's utterance, the preceding one or the following one, in the second pair part or in the question in the first pair part.

The moderator usually reformulates IEs turns before nominating them to speak with the aim of eliciting a counterargument from them. Thus, since he asks questions, responses are naturally addressed to by IEs, even though answer concerns other present debater's argument. Such moderation style provides a greater formality than in case of the later discussed show where this does not happen. However, the role of IR as the one who directs the topic and represents public voices in an objective manner is being challenged. IE uses meta-formulations in this interview with an aim to assess IR's action as argumentative and expressing his personal opinion, not an expression of an

objective public voice. The IR understands those meta-formulations in this way and tries to contest them, intending to re-establish the validity of his argument as supported by objective authority data, not as being just a matter of his personal interpretation. IE undermines IR's role as an objective voice animator and in order to disagree with formulations included in IR's questions. This means that she needs to change their status from assumed background information into a topic to contest, or, more specifically, into a negotiable argument.

In the fragment 1 below, JM starts, in lines 1-2, from more objectified formulations with a general reference using a more objectified infinite structure such as in: "it's wrong to say" to arrive at more personalized ones, using a direct address forms of 2nd person pronoun reference "you," saying: "First of all I think it's wrong to say that Israel (.) eh sort of has (.) no holds barred on physical coercion techniques." The meta-formulation is hedged by discourse markers "first of all" and "I think," delaying, thus, hedging the production of meta-formulation. In turn the meta-formulation itself delays the answer to the question proper. JM's actions are mitigated here for two reasons: first, because not answering the question might result in an interactive problem in an interview. Using such a hedged meta-formulation shows that IE knows that such action is not expected from her as an IE. Additionally, hedging allows her to follow politeness routines in disagreement.

Reformulations used by the IE serve the purpose of directing the topic of the discussion and contesting the assumptions included in IR's questions. The only way the IE can negotiate the assumption and comply with the role of the IE to answer questions to the point is to reformulate the presumption embedded in moderator's question. In this way IE and IR orientate to the interview as having a rather classical structure in the sense that the moderator nominates speakers and IR and an IE are bound by the question-answer routine and using meta-formulation allows them to depart from the scheme while maintaining sequential and topical contiguity.

Fragm. 1 [Torture and terror, *Uncommon knowledge internet discussion*, 01:30]

1 JM: First of all I think it's wrong to say that Israel (.)
 2 eh sort of has (.) no holds barred on physical coercion techniques
 3 PR: right
 4 JM: [The Israeli Supreme The Israeli]
 5 PR: [(all I know) that (.) they do have]
 6 JM: Supreme Court has come in and has outlawed a number=
 7 PR: =yes=
 8 JM: =of [stress and duress (.) techniques]
 9 PR: [that's precisely the point]
 10 (.)
 11 PR: that is precisely [the point they have drawn lines very closely]
 12 JM: [But also a number of stress and duress] techniques that fall short of
 13 torture that are cruel=
 14 PR: =right=
 15 JM: =inhumane or degrading treatment
 16 PB: uhhh::
 17 JM: are also illegal in Israel
 18 PB: °that's right°
 19 JM: It's not just=
 20 PR: =fine=
 21 JM: torture It's also things
 22 PR: But they have [very] explicitly carved out a space where]
 23 JM: [.hhh like stress (.) and duress pres- eh:]
 24 PR: interrogators are (.) allowed (.) to use (.) coercion
 25 JM: and I'm not sure I I don't believe that (.) that the tactics you've described there would in fact
 26 be lawful in Israel now
 27 PR: Well I did [the- th the source- comes comes] from an art-
 28 JM: [uh::m they they]
 29 PR: I'll just give you the source I'll give the audience
 30 [the sources]
 31 JM: [yeah]
 32 PR: It comes from a long article in the *Atlantic Monthly* by Mark Bowden
 33 (.)((gesticulating))
 34 PR: All right
 35 JM: But I I I think under (.) s- some of the Israeli Supreme Court decisions that would be yh
 36 yh(.) questionable whether those would would [qualify or not]
 37 PR: [You grant however] that in the reality
 38 that Israel faces (.) it is perfectly reasonable and indeed perhaps commendable that they actually
 39 faced up to it and have drawn lines (.) that the legal and political process has addressed the
 40 question .hhh of what you may and may not use and have come down on the side (.) that (.)
 41 physical coercion is in some circumstances justified
 42 JM: I think the story[of Israel]
 43 PR: [and you'd like to see] us (.) do the same
 44 JM: I think the story of- (.) no I'm not sure that I I agree with your (.) characterization of what
 45 has happened in Israel (.) I think the: s-s:story is a little more nuanced than that which is that
 46 over time .hhh they went through a period where they allowed more uh: physical coercion than
 47 they do now (.)and they:: (.) experimented with that and d:iscovered that it was (.) bad for their
 48 political system↑ it was bad for their country .hhh and over time they they've begun restricting
 49 more and more the techniques that are used there
 50 PR: ok

In lines 9 and 11, IR uses meta-formulation to introduce a reformulation of JM's argument and prove that the upshot of JM's argument actually supports his earlier formulation: "that is precisely [the point they have drawn lines very closely]." It appears as a self-initiated repair in the second part of a pair and is combined with a reformulation. Moderator's utterance follows as a reaction to interviewee's argumentative meta-formulation.

In lines 25-26, JM, an IE, in response to moderator's arguments, produces again a meta-formulation, followed by a reformulation: "and I'm not sure I I don't believe that (.) that the tactics you've described there would in fact be lawful in Israel now." The meta-formulation is hedged, expanded and followed by reformulations. The action's aim is to contest the statement included in the earlier IR's question. JM hedges her assessment by using hesitation markers, personal opinion prefaces "I'm not sure," "I don't believe that" and by using the conditional structure "would." JM shows the orientation to the classical IE and IR roles, with the IR asking questions and IE answering them and she aims to negotiate the possibility to steer the topic to some degree. However, at the same time, JM's clearly undermines another classical aspect of IR's acting as an objective public representative. Using a meta-formulation, the IE tries to foreground the argument formulated in IR's preliminary in order to contest it.

In lines 27, 29-30, 32, the moderator responds, re-establishing his journalistic role as complying with standards of objectivity: "Well I did [the- th the sour- comes comes] from an art-," "I'll just give you the source I'll give the audience [the sources]," "It comes from a long article in the Atlantic Monthly by Mark Bowden." Moderator's reaction shows his interpretation of JM's meta-formulation as challenging his objectivity, since, he produces his own meta-description to redefine his earlier statements as a valid and objective quotation of a well-documented case from a published article. PR treats IE's actions as a trial to undermine his role of an objective "public voices moderator" into the one of a co-discussant who formulates subjective judgments which are thus open to a reinterpretation. His aim is to reestablish his role as an impartial and thus credible moderator and treats it as the problem to be dealt with immediately before JM moves further to formulate her argument, thus, he successfully interrupts her turn to revalidate his earlier formulation. Yet, JM continues to discuss the topic she forwarded from the prefatory background of IR's turn, in lines 35 and 36: "JM: But I I I think under (.) s- some of the Israeli Supreme Court decisions that would be yh yh(.) questionable whether those would would [qualify or not]."

In the next turn the moderator introduces a meta-formulation: “you grant however,” to go on with a reformulation, in lines 37-41 and in line 43, and “you’d like to see us do the same,” thus repeating his earlier argument and reformulating what might be treated as the upshot of his understanding of what she said. Yet, the cycle repeats and JM, in lines 44-4,5 contests moderator’s description by using another meta-formulation, this time however, this is a response to moderator’s turn: “I think the story of- (.) no I’m not sure that I I agree with your (.) characterization of what has happened in Israel (.) I think the: s-s:tory is a little more nuanced than that.” The action is hedged just like the previous one because again the IE contests the objectivity of moderator’s formulation.

All in all, as can be observed, JM’s succeeds in making journalist’s prefatory comment a topic of the discussion. The basic observed meta-formulation functions are to negotiate IE and IR paired roles in order to direct the topic and contest journalist’s argument. The IE mitigates her meta-formulations thus showing an orientation to the classical norms of the interview, whose violation entails an interactional trouble. Mitigations of meta-formulations serve as well the aim of polite disagreement.

The next discussed show’s title is *Politically incorrect with Bill Maher*, aired on ABC Seven. As the title suggests, this is a panel discussion, humorous, lighthearted and ironic. The moderator and guests tell jokes, and play a debate game. The topic concerns a controversial issue of John Walker, American teenager who joined the Taliban. The problem discussed is whether he can be described as a traitor or not.

The discussion has a confrontational character; speakers often talk at the same time, interrupting one another and competing for a turn, which results in numerous overlaps. Debaters speak with emphasis, with an animated intonation and in loud voices, while the studio audience takes choral turns, applauding and laughing. In this show, speed and dynamism are more important than a profound and nuanced probing of a discussion problem. The panel resembles a competition game in which direct counterarguments are expected to appear.

The moderator, Bill Maher, introduces the guests, but he does not nominate them to take turns. Instead, he introduces the topics, providing background knowledge to the discussion, which includes also quotations from other media. However, after each successive introduction of the subtopic, he takes part in a discussion as a co-debater, while discussants self-select for a turn. As a result utterances are also relatively short in comparison with the previously analyzed discussion, since they usually get interrupted or overlapped either by a moderator or other participant. The show’s convention invites such conversational behavior. The formal

sequential aspect retained from classical interviews is that debaters do not introduce new topics, they usually stick to the ones introduced by the moderator.

Overview

Interaction participants use meta-formulations to incite the discussion or to contest an argument. Meta-formulations often function here as teases used to play a debate game with an exaggerated directness, thus, they are more direct and less mitigated than the ones used in the previous discussion, since there is no need for mitigation in interactional events treated as games by its participants.

On the whole, in comparison with the previous discussion, there are fewer meta- and reformulations, and most of them are used by BT, who as a foreigner apparently learns the rules of the genre online. Reformulations and meta-formulations do not appear that frequently since the debate is treated as a game whose purpose is being direct and provocative, while the moderator emphasizes his personal and playfully exaggerated bias in approaching the subject.

Fragm. 1 [American Taliban 1, *Politically Incorrect* with Bill Maher on ABC, 00:20]

- 1 BM: ye::s=
- 2 DT: =and I was twenty three years old (.) and I spent three years on the front line filming and I
- 3 can tell I was very young (..)and (at) that time I was doing things which I wouldn't do now (.)
- 4 because i didn't think about it
- 5 HT?: (probably)
- 6 DT: and it is young
- 7 (...)
- 8 DT: I mean
- 9 (..)
- 10 S?: ehlm
- 11 DT: you can't just put- (.) you know he's a traitor ((clapping his hands)) you have to see:: what
- 12 did he do:: I mean you know::=
- 13 HT: that case [that case]
- 14 DT: [in case by case basis]
- 15 HT: this is=
- 16 DT: you can't just generalize things [like like that]
- 17 SG: [but that's why he] but that's why he's

DT, who is a Bosnian director, is relatively indirect in comparison to other participants since he mitigates his utterances using hedges, such as “just,” “you know,” appealers “you have to see,” “I mean,” showing an orientation to polite disagreement format. In lines 8, 11-12 and 16, he produces a relatively mitigated meta-textual actions, followed by a reformulation, an upshot of the previous arguments other debaters produced.

His last meta-formulation is quite direct when compared to previous discussion as he uses fewer hedges and a direct address towards the other debater: “you can’t just generalize,” as it directly addresses in: “you can't just put - (.) you know he's a traitor you have to see:: what did he do:: I mean you know”, “you can't just generalize things [like like that.” This last quoted meta-formulation is less hedged since it appears at the sum up position, in the follow up turn, when the major mitigating job has already been done.

Fragm. 3 [American Taliban 4, *Politically Incorrect* with Bill Maher on ABC, 00:16]

- 1 BM: and he's not a boy
- 2 DT: no he's not
- 3 BM: he's
- 4 SG: I think
- 5 (.)
- 6 SG: [I think (it's actually the same thing]
- 7 BM: [you know::(..) brainwashing]
- 8 SG: that he should be: (..) that he should be:: brought to trial and (.)
- 9 and if it's proven that he (..) committed treason he should be hold accountable=
- 10 BM: =right=
- 11 DT: =ok (.) but don't (.) you know:: don't
- 12 SG: xxxxx
- 13 DT: call him traitor before he::=
- 14 SG: = I'm no- [I'm]
- 15 DT: [he] did it >THAT'S THE ONLY THING [I'M saying]<
- 16 HT: [that's just
- 17 your::] sty:::le hhh ((pointing towards SG))
- 18 SG: hhhhhhhjh
- 19 HT: ei::::

DT produces another meta-formulation, in lines 11, 13, 15, directed at other debater’s opinion: “ok (.) but don't (.) you know:: don't call him traitor before he, he] did it >THAT'S THE ONLY THING [I'M saying].” This action is mitigated as well, since it is preceded by an agreement token “OK” and hedges such as “you know” and a self-referencing meta-formulation “that’s the only thing I’m saying.” It has a purely argumentative function to contest SG’ argument. The action is realized in three successive turns since SG treats it as an accusation and interrupts BT’s turns with a direct denial and a trial to repair and probably reformulate his argument.

Additionally, in line 16, HT produces a different kind of non-argumentative meta-formulation. It overlaps with DT’s description, somehow jocularly reformulating it and offering a competitive description

of SG's actions referring to role as a debate game player and a possible tease: "[that's just your::] sty:::le hhh ((pointing towards SG))."

Fragm. 4 [American Taliban, *Politically Incorrect* with Bill Maher on ABC, 00:27]

- 1 DT: in case of Bosnia there were people like me: (..) I was ready to fight for for for for
- 2 free::dom of my country (..) I was ready to stop you know::: bloodshed and stuff like this (.) but
- 3 believe me for first three (...) months of war I had a gun (...) with three bullets
- 4 (3.5)
- 5 DT: that was my war=
- 6 BT:=yeah
- 7 DT: [and xxxxxxxx]
- 8 BM: [I don't understand] your point there
- 9 (..)
- 10 DT: NOBODY GAVE US WEA [PONS]
- 11 BT: [the means (.) to fight]
- 12 DT: [YOU KNOW] THERE ARE MEANS
- 13 BM: [ah:::]
- 14 DT: YOU CAN HELP THESE PEOPLE (.) YOU DON'T EVEN HAVE TO SEND
- 15 SOLDIERS in there
- 16 BM: you [won the war with three bullets]
- 17 DT: [you can still treat them as a] ballet dancer if you want
- 18

From time to time moderator demands explanations from a debater, initiating actions that direct the topic. He for instance prompts an IE to explain the point that is not sufficiently developed or not clearly connected to the topic. In line 8, BM produces such meta-formulation as a repair initiator: "I don't understand] your point there." However, this repair initiator is not intended to argue a point but is used to signal a lack of understanding of DT's utterance. Later on, in line 13, comprehension is signaled by a receipt token "ah." The meta-formulation is unmitigated and BM interrupts DT to clarify incomprehension before DT proceeds with his argument. As a result, DT reformulates his story, and other debater cooperates in this reformulation supporting it.

5. Conclusion

The functions of the observed meta-formulations depend on how interaction participants' perceive the ongoing interactional event or genre. In game genres, meta-formulations appear quite rarely as the topic flows more freely in a conversational-like manner and thus there's no need to direct it by using meta-formulations. If they do appear, they mainly focus on game features of the show or are directed at negotiating comprehension just like in conversations. In consequence, the level of mitigation of such actions is also lower than in more academic and more closely moderated TV

Table 2

IE (interviewee)				
	Argumentative		Non-argumentative	
	1st pair part position	2nd pair part position (response)	1st pair part position	2nd pair part position (response)
Mitigated ↑ ↓		<p>Negotiating the topic, contesting the discussion style – directed at co-debaters' turns</p> <p><i>you can't just put- (.) you know he's a traitor ((clapping his hands)) you have to see:: what did he do:: I mean you know::=</i></p> <p><i>you can't just generalize things [like like that</i></p> <p><i>ok (.) but don't (.) you now:: don't call him traitor before he::= he] did it THAT'S THE ONLY THING [I'M saying]<</i></p> <p>Contesting IR's formulation and steering the topic.</p> <p><i>First of all I think it's wrong to say that Israel (.) oh sort of has (.) no holds barred on; and I'm not sure I I don't believe that (.) that the tactics you've described there would in fact be lawful in Israel now/no I'm not sure that I I agree with your (.) characterization of what has happened in Israel (.) I think the: s-s:story is a little more nuanced than that</i></p>		
Non mitigated				Game like teases <i>at this is just your style</i>

In general, such as in case of JM's meta-formulations in *Table 1*, meta-formulations can show a complex “double meta-structure,” consisting of several components such as discourse markers which can mitigate the meta-formulation itself, while the meta-formulation itself can function as a mitigating action in reference to discourse preceding or following it.

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¹ Transcription symbols:

- (.) micropause
- (1.0) pause in seconds
- [the beginning of an overlap
-] the end of an overlap
- : prolonged sound
- h outbreath or laughter
- .hhh inbreath
- a emphasis
- CAPITALS utterance louder than the surrounding talk
- (xxxx) unintelligible talk or a transcriber's guess
- °silent° utterance
- ↑raising intonation
- ↓falling intonation
- >quicker< and <slower> utterance
- interrupted or discontinued utterance or a sharp cut-off of the prior sound
- = latching between utterances.